

Hard beginnings, hard labor, leave
miner with surprisingly few regrets

You could say Miami, Ariz. native Vincente Valenzuela is a graduate of the School of Hard Knocks. In fact, that's the only school he's ever graduated from.

Valenzuela's mother died when he was 6 years old, and he says his father was in and out of prison most of his life. His older sister was taken in by an elderly couple, and Valenzuela was given shelter by a family that already had a half-dozen children of their own.

Around 1932, when incumbent Herbert Hoover and upstart Democratic challenger Franklin D. Roosevelt were battling it out at the polls, the patriarch of Valenzuela's surrogate family got into a battle of his own at a local bar, and died a few days later of a head injury.

Valenzuela's sister convinced him to come and live with her at the boarding house owned by the elderly couple, and he did—for a time. He didn't like his sister's new "mom" telling him what to do all the time and eventually he ran away, but not before spending a lot of time with workers from the Miami copper mine who rented rooms at the boarding house.

Valenzuela lived a transient lifestyle for much of his youth, sleeping where he could find shelter, eating where he could find a meal. He and his gang of young friends used to eat old candy thrown out back by the local candy shop. Eventually he decided to get a job, and worked for a time at the local movie theater as a janitor. But the dull work didn't hold his interest, and he began to look for something a little more "challenging."

He eventually joined the U.S. Conservation Corps, spending a year in the Buffalo Crossing camp in Arizona's White Mountains. After his first year was up, he went back to Miami, but there was still no work available, so he returned to the Conservation Corps, spending his final year with the organization in Yuma.

He again returned to Miami, where his dad was living after being released from jail. Valenzuela tried to find steady work, but was still considered too young to be hired on at the mines.

He hung around a group of day laborers for a time, picking up odd jobs here and there. Then one day a boss from the Inspiration Copper smelter came looking for workers, and Valenzuela's luck seemed to have turned as he finally got a steady job.

But his luck didn't last for long. Valenzuela got transferred to work in the mine, and less than a week later, his draft number came up. He spent four years in the infantry before once again returning home to Miami. Mining—and now the military—were all he knew.

Valenzuela was the kind of worker that mining companies loved: He did his job and didn't complain. He became a kind of role model for some of the other Mexican miners, who saw his go-along-to-get-along attitude as a way to fly under the radar and not be bothered by the mine bosses.

While many of the miners tell tales of taking old discarded machine parts and timbers and incorporating them into their homes, Valenzuela found a different use for one of the mine's castoffs. A local restaurant, called The California, would give him a

free pie in exchange for a sack or two of sawdust created from lathing shaft support beams.

A self-admitted loner, Valenzuela shared his secret—and his pies—with no one.

Valenzuela eventually joined the union, because the other miners told him it would be good for him. “The union was real nice to me, they never bothered me,” he says. “I just kept going with whatever the union said. If I had more education, I would have been all right, but all I could do was go along with it and do what I could to help [the union].”

The union selected Valenzuela to be a sort of “goodwill ambassador” to the miners who had suffered accidents and were in the local hospital. “Every Thursday they’d give me cartons of cigarettes to take to the hospital and give them to the people there,” he recalls.

Valenzuela spent most of his life working in the mines. “I never did make the money I wanted to because I had no education,” he admits. Mine supervisors occasionally offered him the opportunity to study a trade, such as welding, so he could earn better pay or get out of the rough labor work. “But I never cared for it, I didn’t have it up here,” he says, tapping his temple. “I said forget it, as long as I had my hands...”

As it turned out, Valenzuela didn’t always have his hands to rely on. While working in the mine one day his left hand got caught in a conveyor belt, crushing his fingers. He lost his pinkie as well as his ring finger down to the first knuckle.

It was a year before he returned to mine. He was unable to do some of his former work, but he could still use a shovel, and that’s what he did. He eventually retired in 1984, but even retirement couldn’t still his restless spirit.

“I’m the moving type, I can’t sit still for very long,” he says with a laugh. “I keep busy doing a lot of things. I make wooden Christmas trees in the garage, make a little money selling them.” He occasionally enjoys visits from his three children—two boys and a girl—who are clearly the pride of his life.

Valenzuela says he has no complaints, despite his challenging upbringing. Many people had their families in their lives to keep them on the straight and narrow path—but not so for him. “I could have been a drunk, I could have smoked marijuana, but in my mind I never had a thought to do that,” he says. “I made it on my own, and I never got into any trouble.

“I got a good family, I’m doing alright, and I hope I can keep going for a while.”